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Teaching Literature in the Multicultural Classroom

Introduction

The project Teaching Literature in the Multicultural Classroom focused on ways in which pupils engaged with literary texts in primary and second classrooms which were multicultural and multilingual in their composition. The word "engage", as used here, had two facets. One was attitudinal. Did pupils *enjoy* responding to and composing literary texts? The other was practice-related. What specific *practices* did teachers engage students in to facilitate their response to literary texts and to foster acts of literary composition?

This collaborative research project was made up of a team of four primary/ intermediate teachers and four secondary teachers, who worked with three university-based researchers over a period of two years in seven schools (three primary/ intermediate and four secondary).

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of the project was to find effective ways of teaching literature in multicultural and multilingual classrooms at primary and secondary level. In doing so, the aim was to develop a range of effective classroom approaches and practices for the teaching of literature in such settings. A subsidiary aim was to link the research associated with this project with research being done in relation to other first language (L1) curriculums. A further subsidiary aim was the eventual production of at least one teachers' resource on the subject of teaching literature in the multicultural classroom.

Objectives

In order to achieve these aims, University of Waikato researchers, in conjunction with the project's teacher-researchers, sought to:

- review a range of approaches to the reading and composition of literary texts in primary and secondary classrooms
- review a range of pedagogical (including questioning) strategies aimed at motivating students and enhancing the teaching and learning of literature in primary and secondary classrooms
- develop, trial and evaluate a range of strategies or interventions for achieving cultural and linguistic inclusiveness in the teaching and learning of literature.
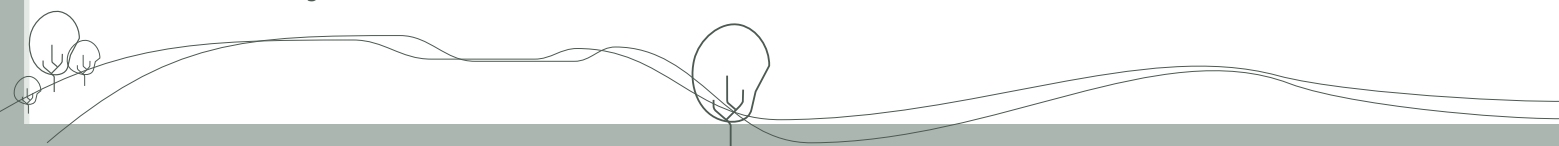
Research questions

There were four research questions:

1. What discourses currently shape teacher understandings of "literature teaching" and "cultural and linguistic inclusiveness"? How do these discourses relate to each other and to the larger context of the national policy environment?

2. What features characterise the successful classroom practices/processes of a sample of teachers engaging students in activities aimed at fostering their ability to engage in the reading and composition of literary texts?

3. In particular, what aspects of pedagogy have been successful in developing a culturally and linguistically inclusive classroom for the teaching and learning of literature? (These aspects may include programme design, resourcing, activity design and formative assessment.)

4. In what ways can information and communications technologies (ICTs) be integrated productively in a culturally and linguistically inclusive classroom for the teaching and learning of literature?

Research design and methodology

This was a multilocale project, ultimately a composite of seven case studies framed within an action research paradigm (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) and drawing on other research traditions such as self-study, ethnographic research and critical discourse analysis. For each case study, the teacher-researcher formulated sets of project-related objectives for classes chosen for the study. These objectives in turn generated a number of collaboratively planned, relevant task or activity sequences as interventions. A range of data were collected for purposes of establishing pre-intervention profiles of study classes and evaluating the success or otherwise of the interventions trialled. These data were analysed collaboratively by teacher-researchers and university-based researchers working collaboratively. Critical discourse analysis was used as an analytical tool, particularly in the initial stages of the project, to identify the discourses framing teacher-researcher practice before the planning of the interventions. Teachers were encouraged to view themselves as systematic researchers of their own practice and to write their own reports of their contribution to the study.

Summary of findings

This study produced a number of findings which, for ease of reading, are bulleted as follows:

- In today's policy environment, with its heavy emphasis on literacy, the *literary* (and the role it might play in literacy development) is suffering a process of erasure.

- Primary teacher-researchers in this project did not readily think of themselves as teachers of literature and, for three of them, literary metalanguage was something they were unfamiliar and even uncomfortable with.

- Secondary teacher-researchers in this project were operating out of a "critically eclectic" approach to English (Locke, 2003).

- Discourses of English at policy level and policy approaches to assessment and qualifications tend to favour assimilationist approaches to multicultural education and at best "benevolent" multiculturalism (Sleeter & Grant, 2003; May, 2004).

- Primary and secondary teacher-researchers rejected discourses of multicultural education that were either assimilationist or integrationist. Both subscribed to discourses of multicultural education and to some extent (secondary teachers more than their primary colleagues) to a discourse of multicultural and social reconstructionist education.

- The enjoyment of literary reading can be facilitated by the availability of customised, high-interest class libraries – hard copy or digital – into which students have had input and which offer them text choices.

- The enjoyment of literary texts is enhanced through activities which stimulate the visual imagination of students.

- The enjoyment of literary reading is enhanced by opportunities to share responses with others.

- Motivation to read literary (and nonliterary) texts is increased when teachers trust students with a variety of diagnostic data relevant to a student's own reading disposition, aptitude and competence.

- Motivation to read literary texts is increased when students have opportunities to share their responses with others.

- The sharing of responses to literary texts is facilitated by a range of forum vehicles, from hard copy vehicles such as journals and response templates, to digital forums such as intranet class forums and blogs.

- The study of traditional (canonised) literary texts, such as Shakespearean plays, is facilitated by a multi-strategy approach using teacher modelling, alternative text versions, discussion forums and inquiry.

- Responses to literary texts are facilitated when students are given opportunities for structured intercultural dialogue.

- When given a choice of literary reading, students opt for short stories over poems.

- Reasons for students' literary textual preferences are complex and may be more influenced by theme and topic than by the cultural setting of a text.

- In some instances, students opt *not* to read literary texts in their own L1. However, the valuation of

mother-tongue competence through the use of translation activities can enhance reading motivation.

- Close reading means a number of things and teachers draw on a range of discourses in designing discussion prompts.

- The scaffolding of activity sequences built on the careful formulation of discussion prompts, with extensive teacher modelling and a choice of response formats, enhances the close reading ability of students and fosters the transition from dependence to independence as students learn to develop their own way of "questioning" texts.

- Close reading is enhanced in group learning situations where the configurations change according to a defined purpose.

- Literary study enhances vocabulary acquisition which in turn feeds into student writing.

- There are a number of close reading concepts that some students find difficult, including the *author/ character* distinction, *point of view* and *theme*.

- A carefully scaffolded focus on formal literary elements (including aspects of visual design) in conjunction with discussion enhances students' understanding of the form/content relationship and feeds writing ability.

- The cultural background of a student influences the way they read a text closely.

- Students enjoy critical literacy approaches to literary (and textual) study (Morgan, 1997).

- A number of critical literacy concepts, e.g., *portrayal, representation, construction, version*, are best taught in a situation where students are exposed to a range of texts dealing with a similar subject or topic.

- Students struggle to think, talk and write about the way in which language is used to *position* readers to read the world in particular ways.

- A good deal of the writing that occurs in secondary classrooms in response to literary reading is "transactional" rather than "literary" and related to NCEA credit accumulation.

- A critical literacy approach to reading invites and empowers students to construct their own versions of literary texts.

- The design of classroom programmes based around the integration of rich tasks encourages higher-order thinking, connection-making across texts and can enhance students' literary and nonliterary writing.

Limitations

Design- and participant-related limitations include the small number of nonrepresentative primary and secondary teachers who participated as the teacher-researchers. For this reason, findings are indicative and context specific rather than generalisabile. Moreover, the findings reported in this report, while authentic, would have generated further questions for investigation had the time frame for the research been longer to allow it to incorporate additional action research "spirals". It is also clear that a stronger ethnographic emphasis would have provided a rich source of relevant data.

Context-related limitations included the at times debilitating effect of curriculum and assessment regimes on the design of school schemes, and on the tasks and activities that are used to foster learning in classrooms. In varying ways, also, teacher-researchers in this project were limited as well as helped by the resources available to them in their school settings (for example, ICT access). The most obvious context-related limitation for university-based and school-based researchers alike was work intensification.

Focus-related limitations resulted because of teachers deciding on the foci of their interventions. For this reason, no interventions focused on poetry, drama, digital/multimodal texts and few on the form/function relationship and literary writing.

Contribution to capacity and capability

This project aspired to be nonhierarchical, having at its core a collaborative and respectful relationship between university and school-based researchers. While the broad research questions were determined at the proposal stage, the specific teaching and learning objectives were developed collaboratively and determined finally by the teacher researcher him- or herself.

The teacher-researchers were changed profoundly by their involvement in it. In particular, the project introduced teachers to the practice of formally researching their own practice and gave them the means of developing a range of research skills. One teacher-researcher used the project to frame her thesis for her Master of Education (Cleary, 2008).

Conclusion and implications

The findings and salient themes of this project have a number of implications for preservice and inservice teacher education. We suggest that steps need to be taken to ensure that all teachers have adequate professional (or disciplinary) knowledge in relation to literature and the teaching and learning of literature-related literacies, including those associated with poetry. Among these is a deep understanding of the way in which "literary content" is the product of "literary form" and, in general, the role of language in cognition. While literary reading and literary composing are equally important, this study has highlighted an emphasis on the former at the expense of the latter. A new emphasis in

teacher education on literature-related literacies should include an emphasis on literary composing (including multimodal composition) and a range of discourses of literary study. With respect to the latter, the culturally and linguistically diverse students in this project enjoyed the critical literacy approach to literary study, though they found it challenging. For the widespread uptake of this approach to occur, teachers need to learn how to carefully scaffold "interrogations" of texts which highlight the ways in which language features construct a version of reality. Teachers also need to develop an awareness of the importance of text selection in literary study, the range of strategies they might use to enhance the enjoyment of literary texts, and the pleasures associated with the sharing of literary response in various forums (including Web-based). The project also highlighted the value in teachers using a range of diagnostic tools to get to know their students.

At policy level, the study of literary texts must not be seen as an optional extra at the mercy of an individual school's scheme or the vagaries of NCEA's separate-standards qualifications model but rather as central to the key competencies of "thinking" and "using language, symbols, and texts". Consideration might also be given to a complete revision of *Exploring Language* (Ministry of Education, 1996) to ensure that it offers teachers access to a usable literary metalanguage. The research project findings showing the value of digitally based social networking sites for encouraging the sharing of textual response has implications for ICT provision in schools, as does the need to encourage students in the use of multimodal software to produce new forms of literary composition.

A way needs to be found to promote literary study in the New Zealand curriculum, while at the same time reducing the hegemony of English as language. A policy shift from standardised testing to ecologically valid testing (Whitehead, 2007) and changes in NCEA assessment and moderation would go some way towards reducing the assimilationist tendencies of one-size-fits-all assessment practices. Though a one-off finding, the project found a reluctance in some Pasifika students to engage with L1 literary texts, and it is suggested that research be undertaken focusing on the use of L1 literary study to foster L1 maintenance and enjoyment.

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